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Kennedy: The Exhibition](http://www.sptimes.com/News/111199/Jfk.htm)**  **Camelot's spirit endures**   |  | | --- | | photo This family portrait taken at Morton Downey Sr.’s home in Hyannisport, Mass., illustrates much of what Americans loved about the Kennedys: a young, vivacious family who projected a sense of warmth and fun, despite their wealth and connections. The photo, a part of the exhibit, was requested by Jackie and given to Morton Downey as a gift. [Photo by Cecil Stoughton] |   By DAVE SCHEIBER  © St. Petersburg Times, published November 11, 1999   |  |  | | --- | --- | | **Despite well-publicized blemishes in recent years, this "bright shining moment" in American history lives on in people's hearts and minds.** | http://www.sptimes.com/Graphics/black.gif |   After all these years, nearly four decades now, the images are still fresh:  The inspiring inaugural day speech in an ice-bound capital. Children romping in the Oval Office. The family sailing off Cape Cod. The showdown with Nikita Khrushchev as nuclear war was barely averted. The dramatic call for freedom at the Berlin Wall.  The motorcade in Dallas.  The lone, riderless horse.   |  | | --- | | photo President John F. Kennedy started signing this portrait to Gov. Matthew Welsh of Indiana just hours before he left on his Texas trip in November 1963. He had written “For Governor Matthew’’ but had to leave it unfinished. He had planned to finish the note to Welsh when he got back. [Photo Courtesy of Florida International Museum] |   These captivating and ultimately tragic scenes are the way much of America remembers its 35th president, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, and the 1,065 days he served in office.  His tenure was described as "Camelot," and the luster of his presidency has remained bright, in almost fairy tale fashion, despite blemishes that have been revealed recently.  In terms of length of time, the JFK administration was barely more than a blink: He was inaugurated on Jan. 20, 1961, the youngest man and the first Roman Catholic to be elected to the White House. He was assassinated in Dallas on Nov. 22, 1963.  In between, however, was a momentous period unlike any other in America's history. It encompassed a world crisis, a cultural re-awakening, a new era in communication, the beginning of the struggle for civil rights, vital steps into space, a sense of national confidence and a striving for excellence.  The Florida International Museum exhibit illuminates this "brief, shining moment" -- the core of the Camelot image suggested by JFK's late widow, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis -- in "John F. Kennedy: The Exhibition."  The show's impact on museum-goers will depend, in part, on how it transcends the photos, objects and narration that comprise the collection, how it recreates the feeling of the Kennedy years and of the man himself. That's because much of what still draws the public to JFK, what has kept the Camelot dream alive so long, is an underpinning of emotion.  Beyond the public sorrow over a life and a mission cut short, many elements made the Kennedy years exciting and unique:  A youthful president not only intelligent -- with a voracious appetite for knowledge -- but also good-looking and vital despite debilitating back problems.  An irresistibly appealing young family.  A leader who, in spite of his wealth and connections, appeared down-to-earth and human and projected a sense of warmth and fun.  A master of the spotlight -- the first president who understood how to use TV, photography and the Washington media elite to showcase himself, his family and the White House.  A glamorous First Couple -- Jack and Jackie -- who brought grace, elegance and a sense of royalty to a traditionally bland office, something the public fully embraced.  A Navy war hero who, as president, challenged people to achieve their full potential.  How did Camelot come to be, and what was its essence? Ask people who worked with Kennedy or are related to him, who covered him, who have chronicled his family in books and the answers help explain the lasting allure of those three short years.  "It was a very good time in many ways," says Hugh Sidey, who served as White House correspondent and deputy bureau chief for Time magazine during the Kennedy administration.  "Admittedly, those of us who knew Jack Kennedy were disappointed in that personal dimension that came out later," added Sidey, referring to recent reports of Kennedy's romantic liaisons. "But he was a very good president in that moment. He understood power. He was eloquent about it. He was a mix of good sense and firmness, and he brought us through those three years, which were extremely dangerous, in very good shape."  Sidey, who covered nine presidents for Time, first encountered Kennedy in 1957 on an elevator in the Senate Office Building. He recalls thinking the young Massachusetts senator was overly thin and rather unimpressive -- a far cry from the skillful campaigner who, on Nov. 8, 1960, narrowly defeated Richard Nixon for the presidency.  Looking back, Sidey identifies a defining quality of Kennedy's that he came to see through their many conversations.  "The pursuit of excellence is probably the lasting lesson," he says. "We were once talking of the difficulty of moving society to do what it should do. And he said, "Listen, never take second best. If you set your mind to that, then that's what will happen.' So he said, "Pursue excellence in everything.' And he did. Whether it was how he dressed, or what kind of airplane was needed for the Air Force, or carriers for the fleet, or how he talked to Khrushchev.   |  | | --- | | photo Kennedy was “a mix of good sense and firmness, and he brought us through those three years, which were extremely dangerous, in very good shape,” says Time magazine’s Hugh Sidey, right. [Times files] |   "The other side with him was that he was such an appealing figure," Sidey adds. "His language, his thinking. Some people say that the only reason his legend survives is his style: He looked so good. That's baloney. Yes, he talked and looked good. But his understanding of power, the speeches he gave that defined critical moments, his handling of the Cuban missile crisis. This was a man of substance."  Jackie Kennedy also played a part in building Camelot. It was she who suggested the picturesque South Lawn of the White House as the site for ceremonies with visiting officials.  As Sidey recounted in The Memories (W.W. Norton and Co., 1973) -- writing the text for Cecil Stoughton's photographs of JFK and memories of military staff adviser Chester V. Clifton -- Jackie created a new era of pageantry.  She coordinated a state dinner in honor of the president of Pakistan on the lawn of George Washington's estate in Mount Vernon. Army engineers were brought in four times to spray for mosquitos; guests were brought in along the Potomac River on four Navy boats; and the National Symphony played as the sun set. Beyond planning such memorable state occasions, she also promoted important cultural events -- music, theater, the arts -- at the White House.  "She heightened our awareness of culture, and its importance in our society, the power of art and music," Sidey says. "Plus, she was a great example for mothers. She protected her children and talked to them of the vitality of literature, arts, athletics."  Sidey also wrote the introduction to the 1995 book, Prelude To Leadership (Regnery Publishing). The book is a diary written by Kennedy in the summer of 1945, when he toured post-war Europe at age 28 as a reporter for Hearst newspapers.  The diary was later given by Kennedy to Dierdre Henderson, a member of his Senate staff. She worked as his liaison with professors at Harvard and MIT and later was part of his presidential transition team. Henderson kept the diary for some 30 years, then served as editor of the book project.  She believes the diary, which is in the exhibition, sheds light on the development of Kennedy's views, thus serving as a vital building block for Camelot.  The diary, explains Henderson in her preface, reveals Kennedy as a strong writer and "pragmatic thinker searching for solutions and quick to learn from others." She contends that it shows Kennedy to be tough-minded and independent and up to the challenges he would later face as president -- something that gets lost in the wave of nostalgia.  "Many people see him as some sort of mythic figure," Henderson says. "Part of that is because I believe people have not immersed themselves in the substance of the man."  Best-selling author and journalist Laurence Leamer chronicled five matri-lineal generations in The Kennedy Women. He is working on a multi-generational book about the Kennedy men. Leamer calls the Kennedy years a confluence of many factors.  "It was a time of almost unprecedented political complexity, internationally and domestically," says Leamer. "It was the high point of the Cold War, it was the beginning of the struggle among African-Americans for a true freedom. It was the awakening among American young people of their sense of destiny. It was the start of a new sort of sophistication among Americans, an awareness of dress and food, all these things came together at once and are personified in the Kennedy administration."  The conditions of the time were unusual for another reason. "He was both the last president of the old political era and the first of the new," Leamer says. "He had to follow traditional political means to win an election, including those God-awful, endless trips during the campaign. At the same time, here was this telegenic, handsome man meeting the masses on television and understanding when he reaches the White House (the importance) of having the first press conference that was televised."  Though Kennedy enjoyed the company of journalists, various writers have taken aim at Kennedy, criticizing his policies. To that, Leamer responds, "The extraordinary thing to me is, despite all the brutal revisionists, all these surveys show he is right up there among the most admired presidents."  One recent poll, conducted by ABC News, asked Americans who they thought was the greatest political figure of the past thousand years. At the top of the list: John F. Kennedy, ahead of Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Ghandi and Winston Churchill.  Why does the public still feel such a strong bond?  One reason, says Palm Beach photographer Bob Davidoff, who took countless pictures of the Kennedys, is that many people still remember the sense of excitement he generated.  "I mean, people's hearts used to pound when they would see him -- he had such charisma," says Davidoff, who has photographed the last seven presidents. "Traditionally, the president was a little older, another generation, and the majority of the people really didn't relate that much to him. This was a completely different thing. And Jackie was the only other person who could cause as much excitement as when the President passed by."  Kathleen "Kerry" McCarthy, a great-niece of JFK's parents Joseph and Rose Kennedy Sr., has another thought about the lasting appeal of her older cousin, whom she met once when she was just a little girl.  "He had a nobility of spirit, which I think is sometimes missed, with all the innuendo and everything we have to deal with," she says.  For years, McCarthy has helped supervise a collection of Kennedy mementos named for her grandmother, Loretta Kennedy Connolly (sister of Joseph P. Kennedy Sr.). McCarthy, who manages the collection with her mother in St. Augustine, has many JFK stories.  One of her favorites is how Kennedy, while stationed in the Pacific during World War II, tore his PT-109 patch from his uniform and mailed it to her mother, Mary Louise Connelly, who was miserable at boarding school. "He sent a little note with it that said, "I'm not so crazy about where I'm at either, kiddo. Be brave. Wear my patch, and we'll get through this.' "  It was that kind of upbeat, personal style that touched people, McCarthy believes.  "He had a joy of life that came through," she says. "Perhaps it was because he had become a realist, not a fatalist, because of his own health. There was a joy to Jack. The cousins who grew up with him used to refer to Jack as the boy whose smile was bigger than the rest of him."  McCarthy remembers her mother talking about Kennedy practicing his first political speech beside the family pool when he was preparing to run for Congress. "She said he looked like a teenager, with his ribs sticking out, instead of somebody who had survived the war. He had been swimming, so he was wrapped in a towel and he just stood there giving his little speech as everyone else was teasing and catcalling.  "And he just smiled and said, "Well, you'll be sorry. Someday I'll be famous.' "  **Back to** [**John F. Kennedy: The Exhibition**](http://www.sptimes.com/News/111199/Jfk.htm)   |  |  | | --- | --- | | Top of Form    Bottom of Form | [http://www.sptimes.com/News/graphics/printer.gif](http://www.sptimes.com/News/111199/news_pf/JFK/Camelot_s_spirit_endu.shtml) |   [Back to Top](http://www.sptimes.com/News/111199/JFK/Camelot_s_spirit_endu.shtml#Anchor-49575) [© St. Petersburg Times.](http://www.sptimes.com/tpc/TC.Copyright.html) All rights reserved. |  |  |

